

Barriers to the Perfect Wedlock of Theory and Practice: Empirical Evidence from Selected Primary Schools in Midlands Province of Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This paper sought to examine the challenges encountered in the effective implementation of practical aspects of teaching and learning at Zimbabwean primary school level. For too long, academic knowledge has been prioritized at the expense of practical aspects of education. Noble policies continue to be made but the researchers are irked by the wide gaps that exist between policy intents and policy implementation. Learners are expected to grasp the meaning and practical relevance of facts. This paper is premised on the recognition that it is possible to integrate theory with practice, despite the barriers that exist. It argues that educators should address these barriers and use their professionalism to facilitate the marriage of theory to practice. This was a case study which collected data from teachers, administrators, learners and parents/ guardians in the selected primary schools. There were misconceptions and even ill-feelings concerning the practical dimension of teaching and learning. Some research respondents spoke strongly in favor of academic and theoretical knowledge. It was found that factors which militate against the effective integration of theory and practice do so in varying degrees. Zimbabwe's public examinations were found to have the most profound and negative impact on teaching orientations. Several recommendations were proffered at the end of this study, with the hope that all the stakeholders will be committed to the 2014 Curriculum Blueprint, which was bent on correcting the mind-sets and approaches to teaching and learning. Seeing the pivotal role of education in any given society, the researchers found it imperative to contribute to the ideas that can lead to best practice.

Keywords: challenges, Curriculum, primary school, Zimbabwe.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

It is not easy to argue against the fact that educational philosophies drive the classroom environment of all classrooms in all institutions of teaching and learning, no matter what level. Education systems are responsible for ensuring that learners develop the necessary skills to enable them to adapt to the demands of the job-market and turn the wheels of industry towards the so-much needed economic development. The teaching of Vocational-Technical subjects would be less of a nightmare if learners are prepared for them while they are still at primary school.

Practical subjects centre on acquisition of skills and this is why it has the potential to steer education towards achievement of national goals. In line with the observed role and function of education, Tanzania implemented "Education for Self Reliance", Zambia conducted "Education for Development" and Zimbabwe adopted the Marxist ideology of scientific socialism and introduced "Education with Production" (EWP). The EWP initiative died a natural death in schools because of an array of reasons which include inadequate preparedness, lack of a clear vision of the

initiative's dictates and what it entailed. This is why it was later replaced by Vocational- Technical Education.

The curriculum pursued in primary schools denied the learners the opportunity to put into practice what they learnt. This was against Gwarinda[1] who contends that theory is verified by practice and that authentic knowledge comes from a combination of theory and practice. The researchers had no cause to support the prevailing practice(s) for the simple reason that no value is placed on the practical features of education in Zimbabwean primary schools. No attention is paid to practice. Learners often fail to recall what they have learnt due to the fact that they are not accorded any opportunity to put the ideas into practice. In this case, primary schooling can be said to be self-defeating. If the practical dimension of education is not introduced and nurtured from primary school level, there is high likelihood of rejection of that dimension in higher levels of education. This paper's concern is that it is ludicrous to use primary schools as platforms for learners to memorize facts, without learning how to manipulate those facts. Purely theoretical rhetoric cannot offer holistic education. It has to be consolidated

by practice and there seem to be challenges in attaining that consolidation.

For any system of education to be responsive to its political, economic, social and technological environment, it has to marry theory with practice. This paper was motivated by the observation that to a large extent, primary school education is artificial and divorced from realities of life. Thus there was need to unearth those hitches which hinder the effective merging of theory with practice in the school curriculum. The second source of motivation was the amount of work so far written and published in support of practical subjects: why they are vital and why they are not easy to implement at secondary school level. However the same cannot be said about practical subjects in primary schools. This explains why it dawned upon the researchers that the root-cause of the inappropriate teaching and learning activities of the primary school level. The third and most pertinent source of inspiration was the 2014 Curriculum Blue Print.

KEY TERMS

Theory, Academic Knowledge; Practice; Skills; Wedlock; Integration; Fusion; Curriculum; Vocational- Technical.

Purpose of the Study

This study was carried out in order to carefully examine the factors which militate against the effective integration of theory and practice in the primary schools of Zimbabwe.

Statement of the Problem

There is a myriad of impediments encountered in integrating theory and practice at primary school level.

Objectives of the Study

- To determine the perceptions of stakeholders concerning Education with Production and Vocational- Technical Education in Zimbabwe.
- To examine educators' attitudes towards the fusion of theory with practice in primary schools.
- To establish the extent to which prevailing teaching and learning activities involved practical dimensions.
- To assess the influence of time, school, profiles, personnel attributes and other related factors on putting theory into practice.
- To evaluate the nature and structure of public examinations and determine how they affect the endeavor towards merging theory with practice.

Significance of the Study

This paper was primarily geared towards elucidating the meaning and benefits of merging theory and practice, as was the essence of EWP and

Vocational- Technical Education. Such an eye opener would then convince the stakeholders to advocate for the perfect wedlock of theory and practice. It was also expected that instructional leaders would appreciate the value of marrying theory to practice. The learners would directly benefit from the enhanced implementation of the said integration. By the end of primary schooling, they could be better prepared to further pursue vocational- technical subjects. For the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC), the onus would be to coordinate with schools to maximize chances of successful implementation of the appropriate policy changes. It was also hoped that the findings of this study would be so thought provoking as to inspire other scholars to conduct more extensive studies on this and other related issues.

Research Design and Methodology

This paper used the descriptive survey approach which is actually part of the positivist paradigm. According to Leedy[2], the descriptive survey method, sometimes called the normative survey method is viewed as "appropriate for data that are derived from simple observational situations, whether they are actually physically observed or 'observed' through the benefit of questionnaires or ear interviews" Each school selected was typical of a primary school in Zimbabwe. This was in line with Bromley, cited in Best and Khan [3], who points out that the sample is not about a particular unit but that each unit (school, in this case) is an example of 'that kind of school'. So generalizations can be made at the end of the study. The key instruments used for data collection were questionnaires, participative observation and face- to - face interviews. Through direct observations, teachers and learner behavior were ascertained as it occurred during lessons. However, Dooley [4] contends that this method is limited in that it leaves out occurrences of interest which may not take place during the time of observation. Questionnaires are defined by Chikoko and Mhloyi[5] as documents which convey questions meant to solicit information appropriate for analysis. Target-specific questionnaires were carefully designed for different stakeholders within the education terrain. The researchers benefitted from using the interviews which minimized the chances of participants refusing or delaying the response to questions. Non- verbal cues helped researchers to identify attitudinal issues relating to the questions raised.

Review of Related Literature

This section reviews the work(s) of recognized authorities on issues pertaining to theory or academic knowledge and the practical aspect of education. All academic disciplines and the formation of ideas are determined by the philosophies that guide our values and beliefs regarding a given academic discipline. The review of related literature is presented under sub-

headings which all point to the justification of this study.

▪ **Perennialism**

Hesson and Weeks [11] point out that the perennialist teacher relies heavily on the lecture method. Perennialism was aimed at making pupils learn without questioning anything. Baker [6] says such education was purely academic and intellectual. He goes on to posit that this kind of education was for the elite who did not worry about the mundane issues of how to earn a living. Rosen [15], Kneller [12] and Hesson & Weeks [11] oppose perennialist education because it is not responsive to the learners' needs, which extend beyond school premises. Because of the dynamism of life, perennialist education is found to be fraught with shortcomings, especially because it believes in the past. Critics argue that perennialist education is retrogressive and this could be the reason why the school leavers, college and university graduates remain unemployed. Full of frustration, these youngsters resort to delinquent and criminal behavior. Zvobgo [17] further condemns perennialism because circumstances have changed in Zimbabwe as elsewhere in the world. One question which begs to be answered then is whether or not, and to what extent today's educators should relegate their pupils to such education.

▪ **Essentialism**

Like perennialism, essentialism is largely conservative. This is because of the emphasis which it places on the 3'R's (Arithmetic, Reading and Writing), which are all academic disciplines. William Bagley is considered the founding philosopher of the Essentialist movement. His philosophy of education emphasized that students have to learn "something" besides just the process of thinking. The movement "essentially" began with Bagley's conviction that education should teach knowledge from the past. Separation of students from past knowledge would jeopardize the future of democracy.

The only pronounced difference between them is that essentialism proposes that education should adapt to the social environment, Mayer [7]. To a certain extent, essentialist education supports the idea that learning by doing is an effective method of teaching learners. They advocate for activities which consolidate theory in order to achieve total understanding by students. One wonders how much essentialism is part and parcel

of the teaching and learning which take place in Zimbabwean primary schools.

▪ **Progressivism.**

The philosophy of progressivism was spearheaded by Dewey who believed that learning should be an active process during which learners do more than receive information. He espoused that education was living. Not just preparation for life and this is in disagreement with perennialist education. Dewey, cited in Gruber [9] was against the separation of practical education from academic (theoretical) education; of thought from action. Baker [6] contends that, "it cannot be expected that after a few years of schooling, learning socially acceptable facts, children will automatically develop into mature, responsible and self-articulated adults". The researchers were convinced that learners need to be given opportunities to think critically and get ready for the future. Carr [5] argued for the integrated system of education, which is the focus of this paper. The Zimbabwe Education Blueprint (2015- 2022) provides

The Ministry of Education has expressed its commitment to more practical work in school curricular but the actual teaching does not bear adequate proof of adoption of the Ministry's policies. Such discrepancies between what should be and what is actually being done, warrant this investigation. There are reasons to which these discrepancies can be attributed

▪ **Constructivism.**

Constructivism is a learner- centered philosophy which places value on the hands-on approach and students being actively involved in the activities of lessons. Constructivists believe that learners should be able to discover facts and ideas on their own through hands on activity because it is the most effective method of making them understand what they are taught. The researchers were keen to establish how much of this true learning took place in primary schools

▪ **Education with Production (EWP).**

In line with the socialist ideology, the EWP tenet of merging theory and practice was seen as a means of achieving all- round development of both the mind and the body of the learner. Gwarinda[1] says learners should be taught to investigate, to query and analyze whatever they are practicing. He explains that true knowledge emanates from praxis: theory and practice. Figure 1 illustrates how the praxis operates.

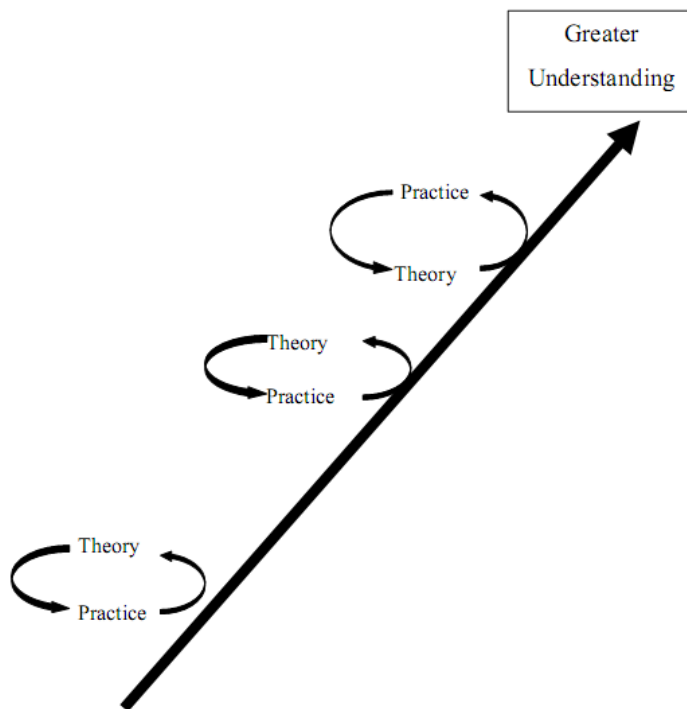


Fig-1: praxis operates
Source: Gwarinda [1]

The natural death of EWP in Zimbabwe could be understood to have been caused by the conservative nature of the country’s education system. The dual education system of the then Rhodesia’s colonial rule offered practical education to the black ‘failures’, weeded out by the bottlenecks which were in place. No whites did practical subjects. The mental colonization made blacks envy academic education and strongly reject education with any form of practical bias. No wonder why the western ideal of academic education is not easy to eradicate. EWP, according to Zvobgo[16] was considered as an hour during which learners tended to school gardens while teachers pursued other activities elsewhere. In some instances, EWP was taken to resemble child- labor; punishment for wrong-doers. The researchers were eager to find out how and to what extent such misconceptions affected the integration of theory and practice. Chivore[8] found that in Zimbabwe, like in other developing countries, the demand for academic education remains high. Hence the perpetuation of the status quo (theoretical focus) remains embedded in the classrooms.

According to Beeby [3], “teachers tend to embody in themselves the virtues and defects of the system, and yet it is only through them that it can be reformed.” Teachers often fall back onto the teaching methods which were used by their teachers, way back. The researchers set out to establish if the learners and their parents/ guardians were aware of how they were

slowly being short –changed by the conservative paradigms. This is because learners and parents/ guardians stand to benefit from the integration of theory and practice.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This was a case study, which is part of the descriptive survey approach. The descriptive survey is ideal because it deals with the present or the status quo. It looks at phenomenon and the related events. It was chosen because it is an excellent vehicle for the measurement of attitudes and orientations. The case study is not only about a certain school, but each of the selected schools is an example of “that kind of school”, making generalizations possible. Therefore the aspect of typicalness rather than uniqueness was the center of attraction in this paper. Questionnaires, participatory observation and face to face interviews were used to collect data. A sample of 15 schools, 70 school teachers and 45 educational managers (School Heads, Deputy Heads and Teachers – in –Charge), was the source of data for this study.

FINDINGS

This section presents data collected from the research participants and relevant documents. The findings address all the objectives in a bid to answer the research problem. The table below reflects teacher-qualifications.

Table 1: Teacher- Qualifications

| Qualification | Number | Frequency % |
|--------------------------|--------|-------------|
| Untrained | 09 | 13 |
| Certificate in Education | 28 | 40 |
| Diploma in Education | 24 | 34 |
| Bachelor of Education | 06 | 09 |
| Master of Education | 03 | 04 |
| Total | N = 70 | 100% |

The table shows that the majority of teachers are suitably qualified. Usually, educated people are more prepared to accept change and innovation than

their uneducated counterparts. So the perfect wedlock of theory and practice is not impeded by the qualifications of educators.

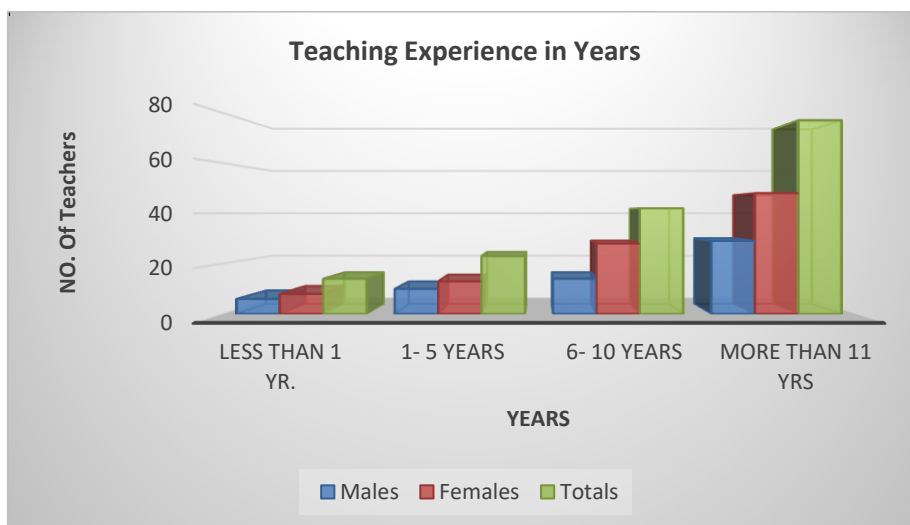


Fig-2: Teaching experience of male and female teachers.

In Zimbabwe, Ministry of Education regulations stipulate that any teacher who has taught for at least 6 years is considered to be a senior teacher. Of the sample, more than half of the teachers had taught for over 11 years. Hence their responses are both valid

and reliable. Such teachers are at the operational level of the education system and they have worked to fulfill the Government of Zimbabwe’s educational philosophy.

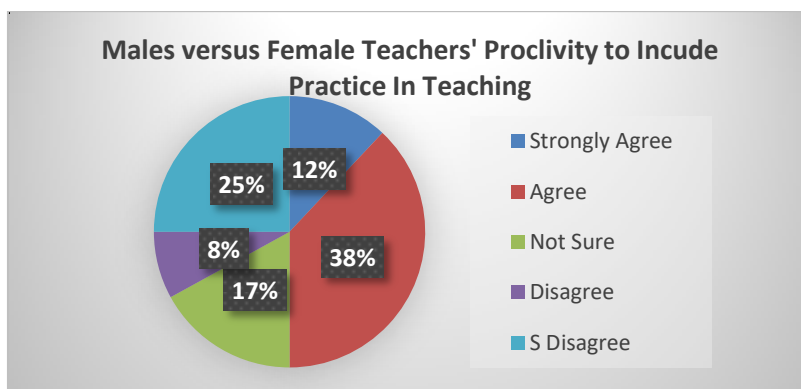


Fig-3: Teachers’ Inclination towards Practical Subjects (Males vs. Females)

Fig. 3 shows that 50 % of the respondents agreed that female teachers were more inclined to include practical elements of education in their teaching, than their male counterparts. In this case the researchers safely deduced that the employment of

more female teachers at primary school level is more conducive to the linkage(s) of theory and practice. This is despite the fact that there were exceedingly more female respondents than males, implying that the influence cannot be ruled out from these findings.

The 2014 Curriculum Blue Print

The researchers asked questions in relation to the 2014 Curriculum Blue Print. The way it is understood and accepted is bound to affect the success

of its implementation. Attention went to educational managers because they are mandated to drive their institutions towards the achievement of national goals through education. Table 2 shows the responses.

Table 2: Educational Managers' Interpretation of the 2014 Curriculum Blueprint

| Type of Response | School A | School B | School C | School D | School E | School F |
|------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Accurate | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 7 |
| Misconceived | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Inaccurate | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 15 |

Of the 15 educational managers interviewed, 45% gave accurate interpretations; 40% gave interpretations full of misconceptions and the last 15% were not even sure of its meaning. They said they had heard about it but were not yet able to explain its dictates. The document had not yet reached their offices. The 40% of misconceptions is too high and is likely to multiply the discrepancies which were first pronounced in the Nziramasanga Presidential Commission of 1999. Ignorance is very dangerous, more so when it is found and professed by the very people who should be spreading knowledge. It became apparent that there is a serious problem in the dissemination of information from policy makers to the implementers. The researchers were at this point reminded of ZIMASSET. In 2013, the Government of Zimbabwe launched the national development blueprint, the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-

Economic Transformation (Zim Asset, 2013-2018). UNICEF, with support from the World Bank (WB), African Development Bank (AfDB) and United Nation's Development Programme (UNDP) took the lead in engaging Government on the implementation and revamping of the Zim Asset coordination architecture. Government, donors, civil society, and private sector came together for the first time in over a decade to jointly plan for the realization of this development agenda. It was fraught with misconceptions and one would readily attribute its poor performance to lack of understanding, among other factors.

Instructional leaders (teachers/ classroom practitioners) were asked to respond to a questionnaire meant to determine the extent to which theory and practice were integrated in their execution of duty.

Table 3: Extent of current integration of Theory and Practice in Primary Schools

| Statement | Yes | Frequency | Not Sure | Frequency | NO | Frequency | Total |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------------|----------|------------|----|------------|-------|
| Teachers in elementary grades do more practical work than those in upper grades. | 48 | 68% | 6 | 9% | 16 | 23% | 100% |
| Generally teachers in upper grades teach theory without the corresponding practical work. | 32 | 46% | 9 | 13% | 29 | 41% | 100% |
| Most teachers consider written work to be the only essential practice required in preparation for public examinations. | 41 | 57% | 4 | 7% | 25 | 36% | 100% |
| Conducting practical lessons is a common activity in primary schools | 15 | 21% | 12 | 17% | 43 | 62% | |

As shown in the table 3, more teachers (68%) of the teachers agree that more practical work is conducted in the elementary grades than in the upper grades. Most teachers (57%) concede that written work is considered to be sufficient practical work for pupils

It was found that at elementary/ infant's level teachers conducted and facilitated substantially more practical activities, thus linking theory with practice. Learning took place both inside and outside the classroom, with a lot of role play and fun. When asked about the interdependence of theory and practice,

teachers agreed that these aspects are both essential. So the problem was related with some other factor, not the teachers' perception. The researchers had assumed it was the teachers who placed more value on theoretical knowledge than practice. However, lesson observations in upper grades revealed that there was minimum application of the concept under study. The professional documents viewed (schemes of work, lesson plans and record books) all focused on written work. The researchers hardly came across links of theory with the related practical and real- life work. Teachers said they found practice to be time- consuming and they were

more concerned about completing the syllabi and preparing for examinations. By negating the essential links between theory and practice, it would seem that educators are more concerned with teaching the syllabi but not the development of the child. It became evident that such focus could be attributed to the requirements of the syllabi and the structure of public examinations.

Having noted that the school personnel readily accepted the significance of integrating theory with practice and yet failed to implement it, the researcher examined other possible causes. Instructional leaders were asked to respond to questions that referred to other factors and the bar graph below shows their responses.

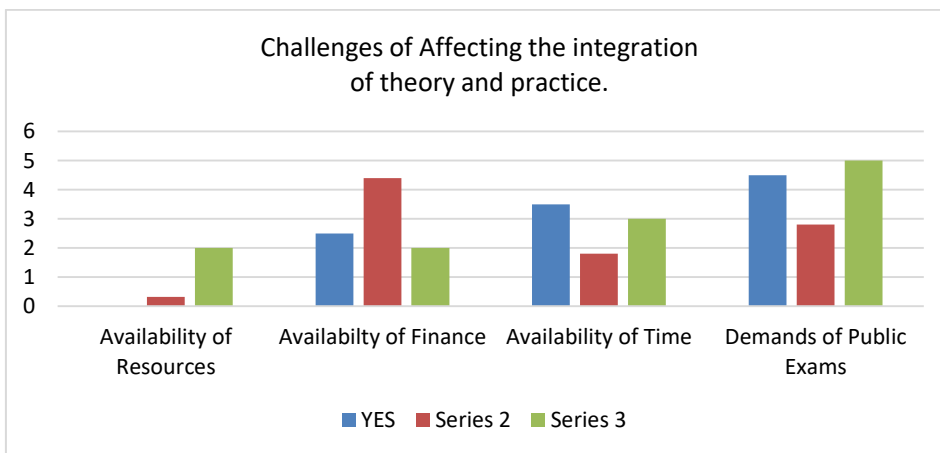


Fig-4: Challenges of affecting the integration of theory and practice.

It became apparent that while educators knew what was desired of them, there were several factors which militated against the implementation of integrating theory and practice. There was general consensus about shortage of resources (material, financial and time) and the pressure exerted on teachers by the requirements of examinations. The terrain therefore did not favor the wedlock of theory and practice.

The study also paid attention to the role, function and perceptions of educational managers. These included school heads, deputy heads and teachers- in – charge. (TICs). The graph below shows their responses questions about factors affecting the integration of theory and practical activities.

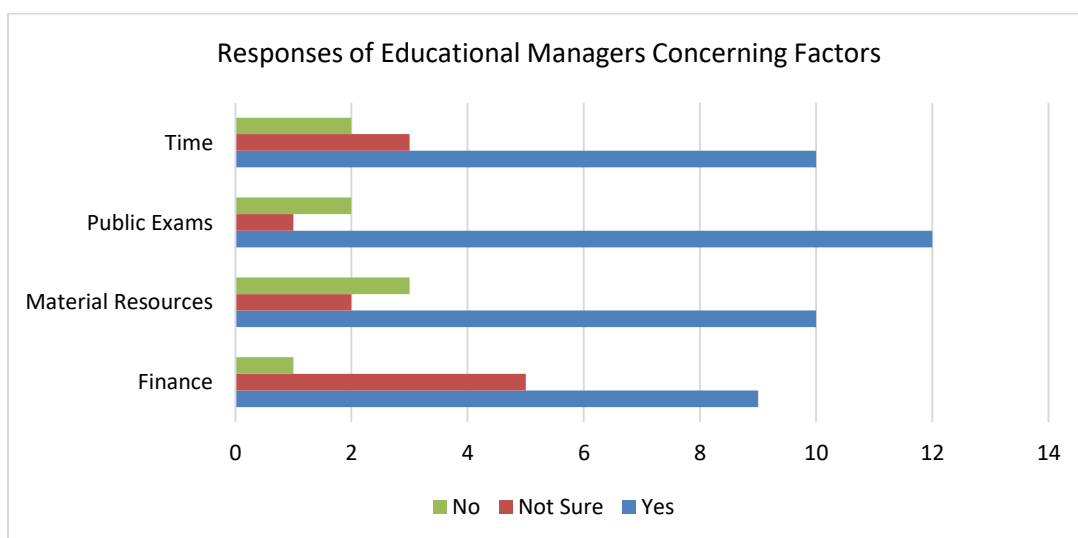


Fig-5: Responses of Educational Managers Concerning Factors

Educational administrators or managers expressed their concern for pupils’ performance in public examinations. Parents / guardians and society at large judged the school head’s worth in terms of his /her schools’ pass rate. They argued that examinations were

all theoretical, forcing teachers to concentrate on theoretical knowledge. Grade Seven public examinations were said to be written so early during term three, that class teachers resorted to use of school holidays in order to have more time to prepare for those

examinations. This actually meant that term – time was not adequate for coverage of the syllabi and revision. Inclusion of practical subjects which were not examined could only be done at the expense of the schools' pass-rates. Given such prioritization, the researchers concluded that in primary schools could excel on the knowledge level but flop in skills development due to the nature of public examinations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In theory, educators in primary schools agree that all subjects offered in their curriculum consist of both theoretical and practically implementable elements. However, the researchers found that the reality in the classrooms contrasted this recognition. So a more conscientious focus has to be directed towards implementation, not just recognition of the significance of the integration under study. Infants' and elementary levels revealed a higher level of innovativeness and application. The instructional leaders at these levels view the integration of theory and practice as the ideal way of enabling learners to make sense of the world around them. However, in upper grades, theoretical knowledge overrides practical application. A certain degree of conservatism was exhibited by teachers who prefer to teach like they themselves were taught (drilling of theory). Researchers concluded that conservatism was a result of the prevailing education system.

The dearth of financial and material resources negatively affected the implementation of the principle under study. The structure of the time- table did not have any marked impact because teachers said they were free to design their own time- tables as long as they did not flout the specific and recommended time allocations per subject. Examinations were found to have overarching influence and negative impact on all endeavors to merge theory with practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the foregoing conclusions, the researchers made the following recommendations: -

- Educational planners. Instructional leaders and parents / guardians need to be advocate for the integration of theory and practice. Once they are convinced of its significance and implications for the future of the learners, they might shift their focus.
- Staff development workshops should be taken more seriously and held in line with the desired curricular changes.
- Instructional leaders could deliberately cultivate and sustain practical dimensions of learning during their lessons.
- Educational managers are obliged to support and motivate teachers in their efforts. This means that they have to ensure that financial and material resources are available.

- Schools should lobby the Zimbabwe Examinations Council, through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, to strike a balance between theoretical examinations and practical ones. Even the questioning techniques should not be dominated by recall, regurgitation and mere reproduction of what was repeated during the term. Rather, the learners should be tested on their ability to apply what they know, draw inferences and make predictions.
- Educators are urged to put into practice the curricular changes of the 2014 Curriculum Blue print and make the necessary changes which will make the Blue print work.

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